

<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20040105/levin>

Vieques Aftermath
by Kate M. Levin

A recent issue of National Geographic Traveler featured a list of its Top Five Caribbean hot spots for the year. Number one is Cuba, the perfect destination if you love those "faded Commie icons," as the magazine put it. Their second favorite is the Puerto Rican island-municipality of Vieques, which was, until recently, a bomb-testing zone for the US Navy.

Last month, two tourists, perhaps acting on a tip from the glossy mag's feature, visited a Vieques beach. They found, in addition to the stunning natural beauty they'd been promised, something unexpected: a small cylindrical detonator with two wires dangling from it. Navy specialists confiscated the object, inspected it, declared that it was an explosive of nonmilitary origin and destroyed it.

Their response was hardly a surprise to Vieques residents, according to Roberto Rabin of the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques. Viequenses have come to expect denials and deflections from the Navy on the issue of environmental contamination. They have, Rabin says, "a long history of dealing with the Navy's mistruths."

The Navy's departure from the island last May was a bittersweet victory for those who had fought for decades to make it a reality. There was jubilation at having defeated the Goliath which, in 1941, expropriated three-fourths of Vieques's land and displaced half the population. And there was deep satisfaction in expelling the killers of David Sanes, the civilian guard killed by an errant Navy bomb in 1999.

But the celebration was tainted by fear for Vieques's future. For sixty-two years, the Navy pummeled the island with millions of pounds of bombs, missiles, depleted-uranium bullets, napalm and Agent Orange. But the toxic threat to Viequenses didn't end when the Navy stopped bombing. Some Navy bombs never exploded when fired, dropping instead into the shallow ocean water and remaining there, lying on the coral reef or resting on the ocean floor. These live bombs leak contaminants and pose an explosive

threat to fishers and divers. How, then, does the Navy--which promised, in a Memorandum of Agreement issued upon leaving the island, to assume responsibility for environmental cleanup--plan to deal with the unexploded bombs lying in Vieques's waters?

It doesn't, according to James Barton, a former senior technician with the Navy's Explosive Ordnance Disposal unit. The Navy, Barton explains, has procedures for the safe removal of unexploded bombs on land--but not underwater. So it has traditionally taken two approaches to unexploded underwater bombs: blowing them up in place or, as Barton puts it, "leaving them there and learning to live with them." The former option is not viable for Vieques; detonating bombs would mean the destruction of the area's ecosystem, including its delicate coral reef. The leave-them-be choice, however, is hardly preferable: "If left there," says Barton, "the casing of the bombs will deteriorate, gradually contaminating the surrounding environment."

A 2001 New York Times article titled "For the Future of Vieques, Look to Hawaii" noted the parallel between the cases of Vieques and Kahoolawe, the Hawaiian island also used for decades as a Navy bombing target. The bombs stopped falling there in 1990, and three years later, a \$460 million, decade-long Navy cleanup effort began. But when Kahoolawe was officially transferred back to Hawaii this past November 12, only 71 percent of the land ordnance had been cleared. When asked what became of the unexploded underwater bombs resting off Kahoolawe's shore, Barton, who was involved in the cleanup while he was still with the Navy, states flatly, "They just left them there."

Culebra, another tiny Puerto Rican island, offers an additional parallel. It, too, has precious coral reef, exquisite tropical beaches and waters sprinkled with explosives and artillery. Culebra, a Navy bombing range until 1975, has been waiting nearly three decades for decontamination. "We still have many bombs here in Culebra and are trying to get the Navy to clean them," Culebra's deputy mayor said last May.

One of the greatest frustrations for Viequenses has been the Navy's evasion of a fundamental question--just how toxic is the material lying in the munitions junkyards off the coast of the island? The question is hardly a trivial one. The cancer rate for Viequenses is 27 percent higher than it is for mainland Puerto Ricans; elevated rates of heart disease, asthma and diabetes

plague the island's population (who number around 9,300) as well. Though links are difficult to prove, many health researchers in Puerto Rico and the United States argue that a correlation exists between contamination from the bombing and the high incidence of disease among Viequenses.

A few years ago, motivated largely by growing health concerns in Vieques, the Puerto Rican government asked the Navy to investigate one particularly littered area of ocean. The site, just off of Vieques's eastern shore, contained hundreds of barrels of an unknown, leaking material, along with a dilapidated target ship.

The Navy's conclusions, presented to a Puerto Rican Senate committee in December of 2002, were dismissed by the incensed committee chairman as "defective." The reason? The study didn't test the contents of any of the barrels, but nonetheless declared them innocuous. Nor did the Navy mention that the decaying ship, the USS Killen, had been used in atomic tests prior to being used as a bombing target.

The government of Puerto Rico then commissioned a new study of the site, which was performed last summer by Barton and Dr. James Porter, a coral reef expert from the University of Georgia. Their findings, including the results of toxicological tests, will soon be released by the Puerto Rican government.

Vieques need not be another Kahoolawe, as new technology promises an alternative to the Navy's traditional approach to unexploded ordnance. After retiring from the Navy bomb squad, Barton founded a company, Underwater Ordnance Recovery, Inc., that has developed techniques to remove bombs from sensitive waters nondestructively. His method removes the bombs with an unmanned platform, then employs one of several safe disposal techniques: defusing them, detonating them somewhere sufficiently far from inhabited areas or burying them in deep sea. The Puerto Rican government, Barton says, supports nondestructive removal as a viable option for cleanup—but it is the Navy that needs convincing. He hopes to do so this coming March, at the first official exhibition of his technology, to which the Navy has been invited.

Whether the Navy will break with its long history of environmental negligence remains to be seen. So far, it has yet to abandon its pretense of responsible eco-friendliness. "We pride ourselves on environmental

stewardship," Navy spokesperson Lieutenant Commander Cappy Surette said in a phone interview, "and the Navy is taking a cautious and meticulous approach to the cleanup effort in Vieques." For the sake of the people of Vieques, one hopes that this is true--but it would be a radical departure from the Navy's behavior thus far.